

Obituary

Desmond Andrew Herbert 1898-1976

It is with sadness that we record the death, at Brisbane on 8 September 1976, of Desmond Andrew Herbert, Emeritus Professor of Botany in the University of Queensland. Professor Herbert had a special interest for us in Western Australia as his first appointment after graduating B.Sc. at Melbourne University was to the position of Economic Botanist and Plant Pathologist to the State. After taking up his duties here early in 1918, in due course he became a foundation member of the Royal Society of Western Australia and served on some of its committees. He appreciated the importance of communicating to the State the results of his scientific researches, and he did this largely through the medium of the Journal of the Royal Society of Western Australia.

In retrospect it seems almost incredible the amount of botanical work Herbert published in the relatively short period that he was Economic Botanist here. Despite his comparative youth (I believe he was not yet 20 when he was appointed) his work has the stamp of scientific maturity, and his paper dealing with the structure and parasitism of the Christmas Tree (*Nuytsia floribunda*), read to the Society in April 1919, is a classic. His interest in the problem was aroused when, in his capacity as Plant Pathologist, he investigated the matter of a field of carrots in Como which were starting to die off when only half grown. He found white collar-like structures strangling the carrot roots and traced the connections of these back to a clump of *Nuytsia* trees 40 m away. He then began a careful study of the Christmas Tree and demonstrated that it could parasitise the roots of many other plants. His work ended, once and for all, the long-standing botanical controversy as to whether *Nuytsia* was or was not a parasite, and vindicated the theoretical views of Harvey. His anatomical studies of the plant also led to an understanding of its curious growth habit. His work on the parasitism of the Sandalwood (carried out jointly with C. A. Gardner, whose interest in botany he had aroused and fostered) followed. Believing that it was essential to have a continuing record of new plants discovered and described, Herbert next inaugurated a series of papers called "Contributions to the Flora of W.A." and up to the end of 1921 four papers had been published. However, these three exciting discovery years were all that

Herbert was to spend in Western Australia as he accepted an invitation to the Chair of Botany in Manila.

It has been pointed out elsewhere (Presidential Address, 1971) that the measure of the potential importance for Western Australia of botanists like Herbert, had they stayed longer, is indicated by the quality of their later work. It may be appropriate, therefore, to briefly outline Des Herbert's contribution to botany in Queensland, where he joined the University in 1924 and became the foundation Professor of Botany in 1948. His interests now lay more in ecology and plant geography, and in 1935 he devoted his presidential address to the Royal Society of Queensland to an account of the relationships of the Queensland flora. In the same year his presidential address to Section M of ANZAAS dealt with the question of the climatic shifting of Australian vegetation. Being again President of Section M in 1960 (a rare honour) he reported on the tropical and sub-tropical rain forests of Australia. Despite the demands of teaching and administration (he was twice dean of the faculty of science in the University and for many years the local secretary for ANZAAS in Brisbane), Professor Herbert published over 40 significant scientific papers and also wrote the highly successful horticultural work entitled "Gardening in warm climates".

It was through ANZAAS that I first met Des Herbert in Perth in 1947 not long after I had arrived here myself. I found him to be a stimulating personality, and he had an extraordinarily good knowledge of the vegetation of Western Australia although he had been out of the State for many years. I saw him frequently after that at various meetings and profited much from discussions with him.

Professor Herbert retired in 1965 and in 1966 he was awarded the C.M.G. for his services to botany. It can truly be said that the foundations for these services were laid during his time in Western Australia and were, in part, expressed through the medium of our Journal. His continuing interest in the scientific work going on in this State is reflected in the fact that over the years he retained his membership of the Society. In 1964 Council honoured him by electing him to Honorary Membership.

B.J.G.